Dan Hassler-Forest. *Janelle Monáe's Queer Afrofuturism: Defying Every Label*.
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Dan Hassler-Forest opens his monograph with a brief biographical sketch of Janelle Monáe's remarkable career, from her[1] working-class upbringing in Kansas City through the major outputs of her creative work. As a musician and transmedia creator, this includes four "science fiction concept albums" (1) with corresponding videos: *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2007), *The ArchAndroid* (2010), and *The Electric Lady* (2013) all develop a story world around persecuted android character Cindi Mayweather; while *Dirty Computer* (2018) tells the story of a human character, Jane 57821, sent for "reprogramming" as a "dirty computer" in a future-set dystopian story world. Monáe's remarkable development of videographic storytelling reaches its apogee in the 44-minute "emotion picture" *Dirty Computer*. Monáe defines "emotion picture" in the description of the video on her YouTube channel as "a narrative film and accompanying musical album," emphasizing her formal priorities. Yet the videos for each song work as standalone pieces too, in the manner of an old science fiction "fix-up" like Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* (1950), in which short stories, often previously individually published, would be linked together with short bridging sections and released as a novel. Monáe's transmedia work is therefore science fictional at both formal and thematic levels. It includes both dystopian and (critical) utopian transmedia texts.

Hassler-Forest discusses these in tandem with outputs from her well-established Hollywood career, where Monáe's credits include the Oscar-winning *Moonlight* (2016) and *Hidden Figures* (2016), lead for "Autofac" (an episode in the first season of Channel 4's anthology series *Electric Dreams* [2017]), *Harriet* (2019), *Antebellum* (2020), and voicework on the animated films *Rio 2* (2014) and *Uglydolls* (2019). Hassler-Forest also notes in the

introduction Monáe's activism, dancing, and status as "Queer icon. Afrofuturist. … Black radical. Fashionista. Feminist. Diva." While less space is devoted to Monáe's dancing and engagement with fashion, her impact as a queer, Afrofuturist, Black radical feminist is analyzed with deft care and even joy. In Hassler-Forest's words, he approaches Monáe "as a figure whose work brings together energies that unite creative production with social activism, interweaving them across different media platforms" (3). This enables him to write expansively about contemporary U.S. politics, culture, and the social.

One reason for the importance of this expansive scope is, as Hassler-Forest himself puts it, "as a white cis man writing about the work of a queer Black woman, I have been very conscious of the limitations this imposes throughout the writing process. … I obviously cannot speak to the ways in which [Monáe's work] resonates with those who have shared her lived experience of gendered and racialized oppression" (7). By locating Monáe at the center of a broader discussion across transmedia studies, Hassler-Forest can claim "to amplify the voices of Black theorists, artists, and intellectuals like [Monáe]" (7). As a white cis male reviewer entering this chain of reading, I acknowledge the irony that my own role inevitably centers Hassler-Forest's writing above even Monáe herself. However, texts such as this contribute to the much-needed broadening of the historically Eurocentric canon of utopian studies. By focusing on theories and concepts across Afrofuturism, Black utopias, posthumanism, queer theory, and Black feminism, Hassler-Forest's book helps re-frame the field's major concerns, demonstrating the importance of centering the experiences and thinking of groups who have been historically marginalized and oppressed for all scholars and students of utopian studies.

Early in the first chapter Hassler-Forest notes that Afrofuturism "confronts us with the fact that *all* science fiction is fundamentally about race. Or, to put it more simply: speculating about the future of humanity is always-already speculating about the future of race" (11). The

history and development of science fiction is inextricably bound to that of twentieth-century capitalism. To speculate about the future of humanity is also to speculate about capitalism. Hassler-Forest turns to Cedric J. Robinson's term "racial capitalism" (used to emphasize the centrality of race to capitalism as a mode of production) to show the cultural value of Afrofuturism as "narrative practice." However, at this point the key term racialization is not yet theorized. A conception of race as a technology leaning on the work of Ruha Benjamin, which unlocks much of the analysis, is only introduced in the second chapter, on Black Feminism (see 48, 52). There, it is discussed in parallel with Patricia Hill Collins's conception of a "matrix of domination" by which racial capitalism is socially organized, albeit without an explicit layering of these theories together. In the third chapter, Hassler-Forest puts Collins to one side to use intersectionality to address the queer content of Monáe's work, using José Esteban Muñoz. Race as a technology is more fully mapped in the fourth chapter, on posthumanism, where Collins's term is also used to chart a path through "race, gender, sexuality, class, age, and ability among its primary axes" (86). There are then several concepts running as red threads through the text, which are developed "on the go" during thematic discussion of Monáe's work rather than in an extended introductory theoretical section of their own. Hassler-Forest's approach thereby treats Monáe's work *as theory* rather than attempting "to 'apply' theory to a particular artist" (7). However, while the key concepts the author mobilizes are not oppositional, nor are they synonymous. Some additional work to syncopate them and fully plot their relationships to each other for the reader would be helpful.

Notwithstanding this issue, by focalizing analysis through Janelle Monáe's early work in the first chapter, Hassler-forest produces an expansive study of Afrofuturism, mapping origins and iterations from Sun Ra and George Clinton's groups Parliament and Funkadelic (together forming the P-Funk collective) to works by Gil Scott-Heron, the *Black Panther*

movies, and Octavia Butler's 1979 novel *Kindred* (19). He thereby offers insights into how Afrofuturist texts perform a "radical political act" against racial capitalism by "resisting and subverting [a] linear conception of temporal progression" and "disrupt[ing] linear spacetime" (17) (a point he returns to later in a discussion of the utopian potentiality of queer theory). Hassler-Forest then turns his attention to Black utopias in an important section for utopian studies scholars. Here he argues that "dystopia is not the reverse—or even the negation—of utopia, but rather its dialectical counterpart: dystopian futures are explicitly *failed utopias*, as they document tendencies in existing Western societies playing out in emphatically undesirable ways" (26).

What then might the Afrofuturist disruption of linear models of time do to the relation of utopia, dystopia, and anti-utopia in dialectical formation? At the end of the chapter Hassler-Forest hints toward an answer when he notes that Monáe's emotion picture *Dirty Computer* effectively has two endings: The first sees Monáe's character, who has already been subject to a memory-wiping process by the regime who has captured her, assisting in turn in the reprogramming of a former lover. But an Easter egg ending follows in the credit sequence, in which this participation is revealed to be a ruse to allow Monáe's character and two lovers to escape. Hassler-Forest turns to Ernst Bloch to argue that "the ethereal white light into which the three of them disappear one by one represents utopian futurity as a field of potentiality" (30). It is (purposefully) never clear which of these is the "real" ending however, a situation that "expresses the painful tension at the core of Black utopian speculation. The utopian horizon it projects is one of freedom from oppression, but this tentative freedom is both terrifying and beautiful: … the expression of Black utopian futurity is framed from within the long history of racial capitalism's dystopian oppression" (31). This argument can also be applied to *The Memory Librarian: And Other Stories of Dirty Computer* (2022), the more overtly political short story collection Monáe has published since Hassler-

Forest's book was released. In particular, "Nevermind" (co-written with Danny Lore) is set in a period after Jane and her lovers escape at the end of the *Dirty Computer* emotion picture. Still on the radar of the puritanical *New Dawn* authorities, Jane navigates the intra-personal politics of a queer, polyamorous femme-identifying intentional community while trying to hold on to and work through memories that are often painful and traumatic.

Chapter 2 opens with a quotation from Patricia Hill Collins, used to ground an extended discussion on representation and visibility in Hollywood media productions that is focused on Janelle Monáe's lead role in the movie *Hidden Figures* (2016). A goal here is to demonstrate the value of analysis of pop cultural forms within a wider understanding of cultural, political, and social forms. *Hidden Figures* has a "thematic focus on the often-invisible labor of Black women" in NASA's early space program, while also going "out of its way to make white audiences comfortable" (33). Such films, Hassler-Forest argues, present racism as "an individual affliction" rather than "an urgent social issue"; (usually) focus on overcoming barriers in the past (thus suggesting racism has been transcended); and "reproduce[e] the reassuring liberal fantasy that civil rights advances were primarily made by white male savior figures, whose lives are transformed by their enlightening interaction with dignified and demure Black women" (34). Despite this critique, Hassler-Forest contends that *Hidden Figures* "travels in ways that extend far beyond the screen" and thus "the film's cultural, economic, and discursive presence still contributes meaningfully to antiracist and feminist movements" (36).

The chapter moves to firmer ground with a return to the *Metropolis* cycle (over which Monáe has far greater agency and creative control than in her acting, as Hassler-Forest notes). Through astute, careful close reading of a series of tracks using Patricia Hill Collins's positing of "the dialectic of oppression and resistance" (41), Hassler-Forest works through several strategies by which Monáe tackles the problem of how strategies of resistance can

themselves resist co-option by the very structures of power they oppose (44). This leads him into discussion of anticolonial resistance and eventually to a welcome conceptualization of racialization, via Ruha Benjamin's *Race after Technology*, as "a technology of oppression" (52).

The third chapter initially focuses on Monáe's fourth and most openly queer musical album and associated media, *Dirty Computer*. After a discussion of Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You* (2020), a series that features several Monáe songs on its soundtrack, it places the album in dialogue with *Homecoming* (2020), an Amazon Prime series in which Monáe played the character Alex during season two. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) original theorizing of intersectionality related to the ways in which Black working class women interacted with and felt the effects of the patriarchal and racist legal regime in the United States. Here "an intersectional approach brings together race, gender, and sexuality in order to unlock queer futurity's truly utopian potential" (77). As Hassler-Forest reminds us, such a possibility was in fact latently possible from as early as the work of the Combahee River Collective. In Monáe's hands, an intersectional approach to Black feminism is strongly trans inclusive and "presents *all* gender expressions as grounded in desire and identity rather than biology" (76), a perspective she has since doubled down on in *The Memory Librarian*. Desire for Monáe is similarly a field of liberatory potential. Turning to José Esteban Muñoz, Hassler-Forest shows how *Dirty Computer* outlines a narrative of queer futurity that "disrupts the stranglehold that 'straight time' continues to exert over us. This utopian horizon is fueled by desire—not only for freedom from oppression but also for the right to enjoy a crazy, classic life [the title of track two of *Dirty Computer*] of 'better sex and more pleasure'" (67). This utopian horizon has indeed driven some of Monáe's more recent work, particularly the 2023 album *The Age of Pleasure.*

The fourth chapter, on posthumanism, is perhaps strongest and most polemical, offering a searing and sustained critique of liberal humanism as a project "predicated on the abjection of Blackness" (91). Beginning with Ruha Benjamin's work to help "understand the material organization of racism" (87), the discussion of race as a technology within a "matrix of domination" is moved forward via the claim that "all forms of social oppression—above all, racism— … are purely a manifestation of social power expressed through technology" (88). Two films that Monáe frequently references, Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), are glossed as examples of a "Eurofuturist conception of the android … [that] position[s] posthuman bodies within rigidly oppressive societies that privilege whiteness" (88). While Hassler-Forest criticizes Monáe's use of the heteronormative "star-crossed lovers" trope in *The ArchAndroid*, he suggests that the pansexual polygamy of *Dirty Computer* "provides a far more versatile model" (94). *Dirty Computer* invites us to consider social oppression operating as a technology on varied levels as "gender—like race—operates as a technology that serves the reproduction of heteromasculine social power. But at the same time it also reminds us that our identities are not hardwired. Our minds function instead like operating systems in constant dialogue with our bodies" (93).

Shifting gears, via a reading of Monáe's voicework for the animated film *UglyDolls* (2019) that "illustrates how liberal humanism's surrogate-self relation is ultimately shaped by processes of racialization" (96), Hassler-Forest turns to consider how "liberal humanism's … anti-Blackness finds expression in the characters, stories, and mythologies that our children grow up with—and the plastic toys that give these ideas material existence" (97). In a phenomenal couple of pages, the author examines anti-Blackness in toys and the toys-come-to-life film subgenre, linked to Janelle Monáe via *UglyDolls*. Here Hassler-Forest reveals the deep ideological base of anti-Blackness in the "master-servant relationship" that such films as

the *LEGO* and *Toy Story* franchises employ, showing how "these movies are grounded in the power dynamics of chattel slavery" but "conveniently cleanse it of its abusive and exploitative nature, even making it appear benevolent, with the toy characters uncomfortably close to the myth of the 'happy slave'" (99). Representation in these films "only provides the 'feel of progress' while ceding more ground than it gains for people of color" (99). The author eventually returns to Monáe's *Metropolis* cycle via a reading of Jordan Peele's film *Us* (2019), for which Monáe supplied a song on the soundtrack. The book thereby moves well beyond Monáe's queer Afrofuturism, using her work as an anchor-point for a wider project about anti-Blackness in the U.S. culture industry.

Hassler-Forest's final chapter aims to show the anticapitalist potential of creative work to explore the tightly bound relationship of capitalism and race (108). It opens with a substantial section on the music video for "Many Moons" (2008), followed by some very fine close reading of Boots Riley's wonderful satirical dystopia *Sorry to Bother You* (2018) (Monáe sang with Riley's band *The Coup* on a song for the soundtrack). Then comes an extended discussion of the film of David Byrne's stage show *American Utopia* directed by Spike Lee, which ends with a poignant performance of Monáe's protest song "Hell You Talmbout." While Hassler-Forest's analysis is characteristically convincing, Monáe's own stage shows and live performances are noticeably absent from the book, and here this feels like an oversight. As a live performer, Monáe's talent as a dancer becomes more obvious, and in staging, choice of outfits, and her movement she invokes a whole history of Black popular culture, referencing stars all the way back to Little Richard and beyond. The live element might also have added to Hassler-Forest's discussion of embodiment and posthumanism, queer theory, and Afrofuturism. Notwithstanding this, the choice to end with activism and protest songs (the final choice being "Turntable," Monáe's most recent output at the time the book was completed) is well-made as the book has no separate conclusion.

Overall, this is a deeply generative book about a great polymath talent of their generation. Janelle Monáe has been compared to David Bowie, counts among her mentors Prince and Stevie Wonder, and has worked with trailblazing artists such as Grace Jones, Egypt 80, Sister Nancy, and Brian Wilson. Her creative work deserves the sort of sustained, careful, and enthusiastic attention that Dan Hassler-Forest brings to his analysis. Moreover, the titular "vectors" around which the five chapters are organized—Afrofuturism, Black feminism, intersectionality, posthumanism, and postcapitalism—are increasingly central to some of the most exciting work in utopian studies as a discipline. In *Janelle Monáe's Queer Afrofuturism: Defying Every Label* these lines of flight ensure the text transcends its primary focus to contribute to these debates more widely.

Notes

1. Monáe identifies as non-binary and in a 2022 interview with the *LA Times* stated, "My pronouns are free-ass m— and they/them, her/she." I follow Hassler-Forest's use of her/she here for consistency throughout. See Stuart Miller, "'I knew there were more stories to tell': Why Janelle Monáe returned to writing sci-fi," *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 2022. https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2022-04-21/i-knew-there-were-more-stories-to-tell-why-janelle-monae-turned-to-sci-fi-stories